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Viet Study Says Bombing Lull Pressure Move

Second in a series

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Johnson Administration strategists had almost no expectation that the many pauses in the bombing of North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 would produce peace talks but believed they would help placate domestic and world opinion, according to the Defense Department's study of those war years.

The Pentagon study discloses that some strategists planned to use unproductive bombing pauses as a justification for escalating the war. This idea was first outlined privately by U.S. officials soon after the bombing of the North began in 1965. These planners regarded the lulls in bombing as a "ratchet" to reduce tension and then intensify it, to produce "one more turn of the screw" in order to "crack the enemy's resistance to negotiations," the report states.

Throughout these years American officials regarded their terms for peace as virtually irreconcilable with conditions offered by North Vietnam and the Vietcong. They recognized that the terms for peace talks would have to be eased before negotiations could even begin.

The United States eventually relaxed its terms on March 31, 1968. The occasion was President Johnson's dramatic television announcement that he would not run for re-election. At the same time he also announced an indefinite halt to some of the bombing and Hanoi, to the surprise of most U.S. experts, agreed to start preliminary talks.

Through the 1965-1968 period, the most uncompromising U.S. planners insisted that the enemy would interpret the pauses in the bombing as a sign of American softness, the report states. Consequently, the failure of the Communist side to make a conciliatory response to each bombing lull was used as an argument for escalating U.S. involvement, either in the air over North Vietnam, or on the ground in South Vietnam, and usually both.

President Johnson was often caught in the cross-fire between the hawks and doves over this issue, as he often protested in private.

The Pentagon review also throws significant new light on the public controversy of recent years about who was primarily responsible for urging the President to order the partial bombing halt of March 31, 1968, to halt U.S. escalation, and to start negotiations.

Former Defense Secretary Clark M. Clifford was lauded by his supporters as the adviser who led what came to be called the "struggle for the mind of the President." President Johnson on Feb. 6, 1970, publicly labeled that claim "totally inaccurate." President Johnson ridiculed the claim that there was any struggle for his mind and said that in-

stead it was his most continually loyal lieutenant, Secretary of State Dean Rusk—and not Clifford—who first suggested the partial bomb halt on March 5 or 6, 1968 and that Mr. Johnson immediately instructed him to "get

The newly disclosed Pentagon study—which is admittedly incomplete; especially on White House and State Department activities—presents information that shows a far more complex background for the President's critical March 31 decision than either party to the continuing public debate has offered so far.

The new documentation asserts, in part, that the idea of a bombing limitation was aired inside the Johnson Administration at least as early as 1966 by Robert S. McNamara, then Defense Secretary, and explored by Assistant Secretary John McNaughton. According to this account, it was Under Secretary of State Nicholas deB. Katzenbach in May, 1967, who first specifically proposed a "territorially limited bomb halt" which is what finally was put into effect at the 20th Parallel of North Vietnam.

This study also confirms, however, that in early March, 1968, it was Rusk, as President Johnson said, rather than Clifford, who proposed the partial bombing halt to the President at that time.

But the new documentation also indicates that Rusk's objectives may have differed from Clifford's. Clifford, a "hawk" who suddenly turned "dove" soon after—but not immediately after—he replaced McNamara as Defense Secretary on March 1, 1968, became convinced, as he later wrote, "that the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless."

Clifford's goal was to change the course of the war. Rusk's fundamental commitment to achieving the original goals of the war was unchanged.

U.S. intelligence had pointed out that the weather for bombing over the North was turning bad, and "It is not until May that more than four good bombing days per month can be anticipated." The prevailing view, therefore, was that the United States was risking

A State Department advisory cable later in March to all U.S. embassies abroad, cited in the Pentagon study, in part said precisely that:

"... You should make clear that Hanoi is most likely to denounce the (partial bomb halt and the accompanying offer to Hanoi to 'not take advantage' of it) project and thus free our hand after a short period."

"In view of weather limitations, bombing north of the 20th Parallel will in any event be limited at least for the next four weeks or so—which we tentatively envisage as a maximum testing period in any event. Hence, we are not giving up anything really serious in this time frame."

"Moreover," the message to U.S. ambassadors continued, "air power now being used north of 20th can probably be used in Laos (where no policy change planned) and in SVN." (South Vietnam).

"Insofar as our announcement foreshadows any possibility of a complete bombing stoppage, in the event Hanoi really exercises reciprocal restraints, we regard this as unlikely..."

According to the study, the initial paragraph of this previously unpublished cablegram emphasized what the United States had expressed with each previous bombing pause, a priority on continuing U.S. "resolve" to pursue the war if necessary:

"You should call attention," ambassadors were instructed initially, "to force increases that would be announced at the same time" (as the partial bomb halt) "and would make clear our continuing resolve. Also our top priority to re-equipping ARVN (South Vietnamese) forces."

The message clearly did not anticipate the President's startling announcement at the end of his March 31 speech, that he was taking himself out of the 1968 election race in order to try to bring the war to an end and unify the war-fractured nation.

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an operating proposal swiftly.

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